

The Library for the Future

FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE

Amy Wald *Photos by Paul Bardagjy*

Affectionately called an “eclectic circus” by its pioneers, the new Twin Oaks Branch Library encompasses all that is unique about South Austin. Drawing inspiration from bookstores, coffee shops, and academic libraries alike, the creators have sought to turn this former post office location into a home away from home for the local community.

Scheduled to open in late May 2010, the reinvented Twin Oaks branch marks a new chapter in Austin libraries, offering everything from self-checkout machines to an outdoor amphitheater with seating made of natural stone. And it is a library for the people and by the people in every way; John Gillum, the project's leader, has been a South Austin resident since the 1960s and has ensured that the library's engineers incorporated neighborhood input into every inch of the 10,120 square-foot structure.

“We met and brainstormed with [the community] about what they would like to see in their new library,” explains Tom Hatch, whose firm, Hatch + Ulland Owen Architects, is responsible for the library's architectural work. “There

evolved a wide variety of desires for the library, and it being in South Austin meant that it needed to look and feel like it belonged in South Austin.”

The Twin Oaks library has been part of the South Austin community since 1956, when the original branch first opened at East Oltorf and South Congress. The library, which was surrounded by massive twin oaks, stood at only 300 square feet. It moved two times in subsequent years (all within the same shopping center), but the changes were nothing compared to the complete renovation of the new location at 5th and Mary Street.

The project has been in the works since the 1998 bond election, but it hit a roadblock in 2003 due to turbulent

economic times. The delay turned out to be a blessing in disguise, however, because it allowed the library group to reevaluate their vision for the new site.

“Since we were on hold, we thought we would research what other people were doing with their branch libraries,” explains Gillum. “A little library called the Iron Wood Branch in British Columbia came up with this idea—‘all the book stores are stealing all of our good ideas, so let's steal some back’—and they call it the library for the future. Sometimes it's called the bookstore model. It's the newest and most popular thing people are doing in branch libraries.”

Gillum and his colleagues jumped at the chance to modernize the building



while still giving it a South Austin edge. From a design perspective, the library merges the vibrant colors and diverse forms that define South Austin with the functionality and sustainability of new age structures.

"It's not a big building with multiple rooms inside of it," Hatch notes. "It reads from the street as a collection of smaller buildings married to one another."

Each area of the library has its own unique exterior shape, and the site itself has two fronts that surround a

central tower. Immediately upon stepping inside, customers are met with a beautiful Art in Public Places mobile constructed out of old typewriter keys by sculptor Stephanie Strange. This initial entryway leads to a large community room intended for town hall meetings. It is an area rich with natural light and equipped with doors that open into the outside plaza.

On the other side of the tower lies the heart of the library itself. As part of the "library for the future" model, Gillum shrunk the circulation desk and used the extra space to add self-checkout



machines and endless rows of computers. Then, with the help of Hatch, his partner Erik Ulland, and their team of expert interior designers, Gillum created a diverse, technologically advanced space that, in his words, "just kind of takes your breath away."

The main room contains wooden beams from a barge that plowed the Mississippi for one hundred years, and the photovoltaic panels that line the roof harvest light and energy in an environmentally friendly way. The main stacks lead to a separate children's area, marked by a whimsical crooked-house-shaped entrance. This space then opens into the library's Reading Garden—an outside terrace perfect for surfing the net (free Wi-Fi is provided for both members and non-members alike) or relaxing with a favorite book.

Twin Oaks also contains a quiet study area reminiscent of college libraries and a clearly distinguished teen area, complete with a big screen TV, comfy furniture, and "wild and crazy" light fixtures. But that is not all—the library continues to expand beyond its internal walls, spilling over into a furniture-filled back porch and the aforementioned amphitheater, both of which will be



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open to the South Austin community even on days when the library is closed.

“There are no fences,” Gillum stresses. “It’s their area. [W]e want the library to reflect the [people] in the neighborhood and their values. That way they’ll love it, take ownership of it, and help us keep it nice.”

Other notable features include a rainwater harvesting system, a back

door with a security scanner, and a dry creek bed that trails around the entire building. In addition, the library will literally stay true to its roots—Gillum and company plan to plant twin oaks out front prior to the grand opening and have incorporated a brick from the original post office into the structure.

As Hatch puts it, the new branch is “not your cookie-cutter library.” With its user-friendly features, energy-efficient

technology, and community-oriented offerings, the Twin Oaks Library promises to become a true staple in the South Austin community, and it signals the dawning of a new age that will change the face of libraries as we know them. □

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